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DESERT DANGERS

**U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT**

**California State Office
2800 Cottage Way
Sacramento, California 95825**



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FOREWORD

"What you don't know won't hurt you" is true of idle gossip, but not of hazards in the California Desert.

No weekend passes without a serious accident, even death, bringing a desert outing to a sudden, tragic end. Many of these mishaps could be prevented with just a little knowledge.

Whether you camp, hunt, dune buggy or spend your free time exploring, every activity has its threats. Your family's well being depends upon what YOU know about using the desert.

This booklet is simply to alert you to some of the dangers before it is too late. There are also tips on what to do if you need help. Further reading of detailed survival manuals is strongly recommended.

U.S. Department of the Interior

As the Nation's principal conservation agency, the Department of the Interior has responsibility for most of our nationally owned public lands and natural resources. This includes fostering the wisest use of our land and water resources, protecting our fish and wildlife, preserving the environmental and cultural values of our national parks and historical places, and providing for the enjoyment of life through outdoor recreation. The Department assesses our energy and mineral resources and works to assure that their development is in the best interests of all our people. The Department also has a major responsibility for American Indian reservation communities and for people who live in Island Territories under U.S. administration.

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MINES



Rich in precious minerals, much of the desert has been mined. Abandoned and unprotected mines without posted warnings are common. What appears to be a harmless, level-floored opening in a hillside may conceal in the tunnel's darkness a shaft dropping straight down hundreds of feet.

Other old mine entrances are completely hidden by brush. Some are yawning trenches with treacherous, loose graveled sides. Some offer cool, moist air near the opening, but contain poison gases in hidden recesses. All of them should be considered dangerous in one way or another.

Sides can cave in; wooden flooring over mined out areas can collapse; vertical shaft sides can slough off into the hole and carry a curious bystander to his death.

Learn about the areas you use for recreation. Read. Ask local officials or other recreationists. Check topographic maps. Carefully scout the vicinity of your camp. Ignore the natural urge to explore mysterious tunnels, and NEVER enter a mine opening intentionally. Instruct your family.

OFF ROAD VEHICLES



Though off-road vehicles driven for fun demand the same care in operation as any highway vehicle, perhaps more, some usually careful drivers abandon caution once they strike out across country with a jeep or motorcycle or dune buggy. And senseless loss of life results.

In 1974 three desert counties reported 15 deaths and 711 serious injuries caused by ORVs: Cycles driven into mineshafts, dune buggies turning over, four-wheel drive accidents, race injuries and vehicle collisions.

How could such accidents be prevented? Follow safe driving rules. Supervise your children. Use safety equipment — helmets, seat belts, roll bars and so on. Don't drink. And don't forget that common sense and alertness are your best protection.

MILITARY EXPLOSIVES



Large areas in the desert were used for bombing ranges and maneuvers by the Armed Forces. There are still unexploded devices lying openly to tempt the unwary — flares, shells, bombs and triggering mechanisms. Bomb disposal squads sweeping the Imperial Sand Dunes, a heavily used off-road vehicle area, turned up warheads, rockets, .50 caliber bullets, practice bombs, 20 mm shells and other unexploded ordinance.

Warning signs are missing on many of these former ranges. Avoid handling anything that resembles military explosives. And teach your family to do the same.



FIREARMS

Some gun shooters forget, or ignore, common safety rules because of the desert's vastness. But remember that people can be found almost any place. Families camped in sheltered valleys have been startled, and unnerved, by rifle bullets ricocheting into their parked pickups. Unthinking people shoot .22's blindly over low hills concealing motorcyclists.

If you are going to shoot, obey gun safety rules. And scout the area before you start firing. Never shoot near campgrounds or any other restricted areas.

WATER



You wouldn't ordinarily think water could be a hazard in the desert. Yet, lives are lost because of it, as well as the lack of it.

Many people drown in canals and in the Colorado River's southern reaches. And to the north there are all-too-frequent reports of people washed down canyons by dangerously swift mountain streams. Obey all the rules of swimming and boating safety. Be especially alert to the dangers of rafting or tubing. Wear life jackets. Do your homework, studying topographic maps and other details. Scout around to appraise field conditions.

Flash floods are also a threat. The stories of walls of water ten feet high rushing down ravines and sweeping away cars and people are true. Keep informed of weather conditions upstream and watch where you camp.

Be careful, too, of drinking impure water. The familiar image of bleached bones by a polluted waterhole is not entirely imaginary. Natural chemicals often poison desert waters. Selenium and boron, commonly found in desert waters, could cause severe illness or death. If you are unsure of any water source, don't drink it.

CRIME



Even the most remote arid lands are no longer immune to invasion by the criminal elements grabbing headlines in our cities. Robbery of campsites is common in heavy use areas, especially on holiday weekends. And you read frequently of more serious crimes against persons. Protect yourself and your belongings, perhaps by camping with groups of friends. Lock up valuables.



GETTING LOST OR STRANDED

People die every year in the desert because they don't know what to do if lost or stranded.

It is a good idea to have at least two vehicles in your traveling party. When driving, avoid steep slopes your vehicle may not be able to climb back up. Look for washouts, large rocks, and deep sand. If you get stuck, try jacking the car up and then place boards, brush or blankets under the tires. ALWAYS let someone — friends or sheriff's offices — know where you are going, when you plan to return and when to start looking if you don't return. Don't forget to check in when you do return.

But what would you do if you did get lost or stranded? Think about it. Plan and be prepared. Carry the right equipment on your desert trips and learn basic survival techniques from manuals on the subject. Remember that desert terrain is deceptive in distance and orientation. Try to notice landmarks and distances as you travel.

If something happens, you should (a) avoid the effects of excessive heat (heat stroke, heat exhaustion, cramps, dehydration); if you **MUST** walk, travel only during cool hours or at night, otherwise rest in the shade. Stay with the vehicle unless you **KNOW** it is possible to reach help, (b) arrange a signal to help searchers find you (flares, smoke, mirror flashes, gunshots, flags, etc.); (c) stay close to any road you might wander across; (d) don't panic; (e) look for searching aircraft and be ready to signal.



EXPOSURE

Aside from the effects of excessive heat, other delicate processes within the human body can go awry under stress. "Exposure" is often mentioned in cases where people have suffered some outdoor mishap and have been exposed to low temperatures for a long time. In such cases the victim becomes numb; he can hardly move; and an irresistible drowsiness overcomes him. Then comes staggering, failing eyesight and unconsciousness. Death can occur if no help comes.

Anyone familiar with the desert knows of the bitter cold that can be encountered during the winter. Wear the right clothes. Carry matches. And remember the symptoms of exposure.

WILDLIFE



You will see a variety of wildlife on your desert excursions. The majority of species are harmless, but you should know which to avoid.

Rattlesnakes are probably the most common threat. Watch where you step. They are especially active at night during hot weather, and may be seen lying coiled in shady spots during the day.

The desert has at least one species of scorpion that can deliver a fatal sting. Usually they are found under rocks or dead tree limbs. When you camp, check your clothes and shoes before putting

them on every morning; in heavily infested areas they may invade those articles during the night.

Don't worry too much about tarantulas. These large, hairy spiders do have venom, but rarely will it result in serious reactions in humans. Usually only a slight swelling, numbness and itching follow a tarantula bite. Both the black widow and brown recluse spiders are more dangerous.

The Gila monster, the only known venomous lizard, is rare in California.

SPECIAL EQUIPMENT



Your first concern in planning what special equipment you need for desert recreation should be an emergency water supply. It takes a gallon a day per person. You should also carry protective clothing; sunglasses; something for shade or protection from cold (an old blanket, a piece of parachute); signaling device (flares, pistol, mirror); matches; snake bite kit; vehicle repair necessities (jack, spare tire, fan belt, tools, extra gas and oil); some canned food rations; first aid kit, salt tablets, any medicines you take regularly (heart pills, insulin, etc.); knife, flashlight, axe, compass, maps, rope, and other emergency gear your particular recreation activity may require.

Just in case your vehicle gets stuck in sand, learn how to cope with it. Carry a shovel and a piece of plywood to use under the tires. Let about half (or more) of the air out of your tires if you have to — this often will do the trick.

DESERT SURVIVAL SAFETY RULES

1. When planning a trip into the desert, always inform someone as to where you are going, your route and when you expect to return. Stick to your plan.
2. Carry at least *one gallon of water* per person per day of your trip. (Plastic gallon jugs are handy and portable.)
3. Be sure your vehicle is in good condition with a sound battery, good hoses, spare tire, spare fan belts, necessary tools, and reserve gasoline and oil. Other spare parts and extra radiator water are also valuable.
4. *Keep an eye on the sky.* Flash floods may occur in a wash any time "thunderheads" are in sight, even though it may not rain a drop where you are.
5. If caught in a dust storm while driving, get off the road. Turn off driving lights, turn on emergency flashers, back into the wind to reduce windshield pitting by sand particles.

6. Before driving through washes and sandy areas test the footing. One minute on foot may save hours of hard work or prevent a punctured oil pan.
7. If your vehicle breaks down, stay near it. Your emergency supplies are here. Your car has many other items useful in emergency. Raise hood and trunk lid to denote "help needed". A vehicle can be seen for miles, but a person on foot is very difficult to find. Use car mirrors and burning oil for signaling.
8. When not moving, use available shade or erect shade from tarps, blankets, seat covers — anything to reduce the direct rays of the sun.
9. Do not sit or lie directly on the ground. It may be 30 degrees or more hotter than the air.
10. Leave a disabled vehicle only if you are positive of the route to help. Leave a note for rescuers as to the time you left and the direction you are taking.

11. If you must walk, rest for at least 10 minutes out of each hour. Walk only in early morning, evening, or at night when it is cooler.
12. If you have water *drink it*. Do not ration it.
13. If water is limited, keep your mouth shut. Do not talk, do not eat, do not smoke, do not drink alcohol, do not take salt.
14. *Keep clothing on*. It helps to keep the body temperature down and reduces the dehydration rate. *Cover your head*. If a hat is not handy, improvise a head covering.
15. If stalled or lost set signal fires. Set smokey fires in the daytime, bright ones for the night. Three fires in a triangle denote "help needed".
16. A roadway is a sign of civilization. If you find a road, *stay on it*.

17. If hiking in the desert, equip each person, including children, with a mirror and police-type whistle. It makes a distinctive noise with little effort. Three blasts denote "help needed" and a mirror flash can be seen for up to 10 miles.

Taken from the manual
*Desert Survival – Information
for Anyone Traveling
in the Desert Southwest*
Maricopa County Department
of Civil Defense
and Emergency Services

SOURCES OF HELP

In cases of emergency the quickest way to get help is often through the County Sheriff's office. They can contact search and rescue groups, the Highway Patrol, fire control agencies, ambulance service, hospitals and other sources of assistance.

CALIFORNIA

County Sheriff's Office Phone
(Area Code 714, unless otherwise noted)

SAN

BERNARDINO ...SAN

BERNARDINO	383-2511
BARSTOW	256-1796
BIG BEAR LAKE	866-7581
CRESTLINE	338-2162
FONTANA	822-2265
NEEDLES	326-3515
ONTARIO	988-1211
TWENTYNINE	

PALMS	367-9544
VICTORVILLE	245-4211
YUCAIPA	797-1145

SAN DIEGO SAN DIEGO

EL CAJON	442-5521
VISTA	724-2104

RIVERSIDE RIVERSIDE

BANNING	849-6744
BLYTHE	922-6121
ELSINORE	674-3131
HEMET	658-3145
INDIO	347-3571

IMPERIAL	EL CENTRO	352-3111
	BRAWLEY	344-2615
	NILAND	348-0607
	SALTON CITY	394-4114
	WINTERHAVEN	572-0229
INYO	INDEPENDENCE	878-2441
	BIG PINE	938-2359
	BISHOP	872-7361
	FURNACE CREEK	786-2238
	LONE PINE	876-5606
	OLANCHA	764-2313
	SHOSHONE	852-4311
KERN	BAKERSFIELD	805/327-3392
	BORON	762-6666
	BUTTONWILLOW	764-5613
	DELANO	725-8534
	FRAZIER PARK	245-3440
	GLENNVILLE	536-8322
	LAKE ISABELLA	379-2641
	LAMONT	805/845-2211
	MOJAVE	805/824-2471
	RIDGECREST	875-4838
	ROSMOND	805/256-2511
	TAFT	805/763-3101
	TEHACHAPI	805/822-3333
	WASCO	805/758-6686
MONO	BRIDGEPORT	932-7451

NEVADA

(Area Code 702, unless otherwise noted)

CLARK

COUNTY Las Vegas

Metro Police 386-3111

Sub-Station Las Vegas

International

Airport 386-3328

Sub-Station

Las Vegas

Stadium 386-3206

Blue Diamond —

Resident Officer 875-4187

Logandale —

Resident Officer 397-2424

Overton —

Resident Officer 397-2186

Indian Springs —

Resident Officer 879-3426

Searchlight —

Resident Officer 297-1260

Laughlin —

Resident Officer 298-2496

Mt. Charleston —

Resident Officer 872-5456

NYE COUNTY Sheriff's Office —

Tonopah 482-6462

482-3462

Sub-Station —

Pahrump 727-5345

Sub-Station —

Lathrop Wells 372-5345

Sub-Station —

Beatty 553-2345

Sub-Station —

Gabbs Operator -2721

ESMERALDA

COUNTY Sheriff's Office —
Goldfield 485-6373

MINERAL

COUNTY Sheriff's Office —
Hawthorne 945-2434
Sub-Station —
Mina 573-2244
Navy Civilian Police —
Babbitt 945-2444

ARIZONA

(Area Code 602, unless otherwise noted)

MARICOPA PHOENIX 258-6941
WICKENBURG 684-5411
GILA BEND 683-2223
BUCKEYE 386-4431
MOHAVE KINGMAN 753-2141
YAVAPAI PRESCOTT 445-2231
YUMA YUMA 783-4427

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